

SENATORIAL CONTEST
1854

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Abraham Lincoln's Political Career through 1860

Senatorial Contest 1854

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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Lincoln and the Statesmen Whom He Vanquished in 1860

BY JOHN DAVIS ANDERSON.

No one who has written about Abraham Lincoln or studied his life has ever been able to tell us the day and hour when he decided to become a candidate for the Presidency of the United States. But we do know that it was not so far back as the end of his single term in Congress. This takes us to 1818. Lincoln was then 39 years old and no novice in politics. Ever since 1822, when he first became a candidate for the Illinois House of Representatives, he had been playing the political game and sometimes played it rather hard.

That first election witnessed his defeat, but two years later he was more fortunate, and he repeated his success in 1836, and again in 1840, serving until 1842. In the fall of 1845 he was elected to Congress. With the conclusion of this term Lincoln had held public office for ten years, or more than half of the time since attaining voting age.

At the close of his Washington life he declined the appointment as governor of the newly-organized territory of Oregon. The Congressional period had not without been unpleasant. While Lincoln labored for a time to secure the appointment as Commissioner of the General Land Office he was not chosen, but that fact did not make him unhappy.

He came to the belief that after all the best place for him was back in southern Illinois, and the best occupation for his talents was to resume the practice of law. Here is in brief his account of the next few years: "From 1849 to 1854, both inclusive, I practiced law more assiduously than ever before. * * * I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again."

A Period of Discouragement.

The truth is that Lincoln had returned from Washington much discouraged because he had advanced no further in public life. Yet his time there had not been wasted. Illinois in those days was indeed a rural State, which had but a short time before, and all within that span of years that Lincoln had lived there, emerged from frontier habits and frontier life. Washington surroundings had put him in contact with men and affairs—with the world outside.

His own defects were, by contrast with the newer life made, most apparent. It was to cure these that he studied hard upon his return and began to suit himself to the environment which was coming—indeed which had arrived. "The lawyers in hunting shirts and moccasins had long since passed away; so had the judges who apologized to the criminals that they sentenced."

The improvement of the roads which made carriages a possibility had effected a great change, and the coming of the railway had completed the sudden development of the manners and customs of the rapidly growing communities. Lincoln noted these changes and advanced with them.

And now we may ask: What was the

state of the nation in 1854—the time of Lincoln's renewed political interest? Franklin Pierce was President and half way through his term. He had been elected by an overwhelming majority. No other President save Monroe had ever received such a vote. The Democrats had carried every State save Tennessee, Kentucky, Vermont and Massachusetts. Pierce was the youngest man up to that time to be elected, being in 1852 but 48 years of age. He had placed Jefferson Davis in his cabinet, and this was advancing the cause of the South immensely. Pierce had no scruples against slavery, and maintained that anti-slavery agitation tended to divide the country.

Of the great Senate leaders, Calhoun had died in 1850; Clay and Webster both passed away in 1852. These men, with Benton, who died in 1858, had by their work as Senators done more, perhaps, than all others combined in shaping the affairs through the middle period.

Early Attitude Toward Slavery.

No one has better stated Lincoln's position at just this time than Lord Charnwood: "On the surface his attitude did not go far beyond the condemnation of slavery and the acceptance of the Constitution, which had guided him earlier, nor did it seem to differ from the widespread public opinion which in 1854 created a new party; but there was this difference, that Lincoln had by them looked at the matter in all its bearings and prepared his mind for all eventualities. We shall find that he who now hung back a little, and who later moved when public opinion moved, later still continued to move when public opinion had receded."

Lincoln's old political enemy, Stephen A. Douglas, had considerably more than a finger in the Missouri compromise repeal. Lincoln could not believe that Douglas had done other than play the thing as a fast and loose politician and decided to advance his own political fortunes even at Douglas' expense. All in all, the debates between these two a little later were the efforts of Lincoln to place the Little Giant in such a position as would make it impossible for him to free himself. Whatever advantage this might bring would be Lincoln's, even though these efforts did not cost Douglas the loss of his seat in the Senate.

Still further in the background and an aid to Lincoln's progress was the foundation of the Republican party. This had not reached national proportions in 1851 when Lincoln, "middle-aged and from his own point of view a failure," aroused himself into new activities.

Douglas was the best known Democrat west of the Alleghany Mountains and to match him as Lincoln did was to add fame to his own name outside and beyond the borders of Illinois. The Whig party was sadly disorganized and the election of Lyman Trumbull to the Senate in place of Douglas' candidate had done much for Lincoln's cause and really did bring home to the people of the Middle West the views which he held. Events in Washington and in Kansas were in themselves forcing the formation of a new party which needed only able men to lead it to victory.

Lincoln's political allegiances of that time were a bit hazy. In August, 1855,

Newark
Feb. 1923



he wrote to Joshua Speed: "I think I am a Whig, but others say there are no Whigs, and that I am an Abolitionist. When I was in Washington I voted for the Wilmot proviso as good as forty times, and I never heard of anyone attempting to un-Whig me for that. I now do no more than oppose the extension of slavery. I am not a Know Nothing, that is certain."

Beginning of the Republican Party.

There were many things about the newly forming Republican party which held a strong appeal for Lincoln and from 1834 we find him almost continually occupied at public meetings, conventions, in correspondence and in consultation with the leaders of this new movement. While the party was too young in 1856 to hope for success in the election of General John C. Fremont, candidate for President, Lincoln received 110 votes as Vice Presidential candidate. William L. Dayton of New Jersey was finally nominated.

With the election of that year over, Lincoln saw, as did all thinking men, that the real contest of the period was yet to occur—that it would be in 1860—and he saw, too, that either William H. Seward of New York or Salmon P. Chase of Ohio was likely to be in the lead for the Republican nomination.

Seward and Chase.

Seward was eight years older than Lincoln and from 1822 had been engaged in the practice of the law. But he had a strong liking for politics and from 1830 to 1831 was a member of the New York State Senate. Thurlow Weed became his mentor. He had been the Whig's candidate for Governor in 1834, but was defeated by William L. Marcy. Four years later he was elected and was re-elected in 1840. It was during his term as Governor that he became recognized as the leader of the anti-slavery Whigs, and was one of the earliest opponents of slavery as distinguished from the radical Abolitionist group—those who were led by William Lloyd Garrison, and who engaged in moral agitation rather than seeking their ends through political measures. The Whig Legislature sent him to the United States Senate in 1849, and he was on several occasions very outspoken in his opposition to slavery, only to attempt subsequently to render innocuous what he had previously uttered. Seward's friends had hoped for his nomination for the Presidency in 1856, but Fremont had been considered more available.

Salmon Portland Chase, too, was of Eastern origin. He was born at Cornish, N. H., eleven months before Lincoln. His father died when he was nine and soon afterward he became a member of the household of his uncle, Bishop Philander Chase, the first Episcopal bishop of Ohio and later bishop of Illinois.

Chase began the practice of law in Cincinnati in 1830 and soon gained wide prominence for his vigorous defense of fugitive slaves. He went to the United States Senate in 1849, and from 1855 to 1859 served as Governor

of Ohio. With Seward he shared the chief leadership of the Republican party and had done more perhaps than any one man against the cause of slavery. Of the two Seward, with the aid of Weed, was the more able politician and seemed the more likely to secure the Republican nomination of 1860. Such in brief outline had been the lives of the two men destined to seek the same honors which Abraham Lincoln was destined to seek.

Just as Lincoln had missed securing second place on the Republican ticket in 1856, so had Douglas been denied first place on the Democratic ticket. President Pierce, James Buchanan and Douglas had been the principal candidates and Buchanan had won. But what to Douglas had been a severe blow had been a help to Lincoln. His name had been carried into the East and he had developed enough strength in the convention at Philadelphia to make a respectable showing.

He was looking toward 1860 when he said: "Two years ago the Republicans of the nation mustered over thirteen hundred thousand strong. Did we brave all then to falter now?—now when that same enemy is wavering, dissevered and belligerent? The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail—if we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsels may accelerate as mistakes delay, but sooner or later the victory is sure to come."

We have seen how Lincoln improved his mind and his standing at the bar. In just what manner could he overcome the handicaps from which both Seward and Chase were free? Both had been Governors; both had been Senators. They belonged to the nation rather than to the State.

Planning for 1860.

Douglas had no sooner been re-elected Senator than he started upon a campaign of speechmaking outside of Illinois. His victory had pulled him up to such an extent that he regarded himself as the logical candidate for the Presidency in 1860. His first speeches were made in Ohio and a little later in the South. However, he had really no success in getting away from Lincoln's questions regarding slavery and especially from that answer to one of them which came to be known as the Freeport Doctrine. Lincoln was requested to follow in Douglas' wake. He spoke in Ohio twice and so effectively that the hesitating were turned in large numbers into the Republican party. Then came the Cooper Union speech.

Of course, Lincoln knew in advance that other names besides those of Seward and Chase would be presented at the Chicago convention. Dayton of New Jersey was certain to be brought forward; likewise Cameron of Pennsylvania and Bates of Missouri.

One can never be certain what a national convention will do, and that of 1860 at Chicago was no exception. But for the work of Lincoln's loyal friends the nomination would have gone to Seward. At the right moment Cameron led the Pennsylvania delegation into the Lincoln camp and Lincoln was nominated. The man of the West, who had lost Ann Rutledge by death; had been defeated for the Illinois Legislature; had been turned down for the land office position; who had twice been defeated for Senator, and had lost the Vice Presidential nomination in 1856, had won at last.

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Dr. Louis A. Warren

Editor

LINCOLN ASPIRES TO THE SENATE

This Lincoln Lore bulletin, coming from the press on the eve of the November election, aspires to capture some of the atmosphere of the occasion in which to release excerpts from letters showing some of Lincoln's political activities.

In 1854 Lincoln made a concerted effort to gain a seat in the United States Senate. The following excerpts reveal his methods of campaigning and also tell of his defeat.

Clinton, DeWitt Co.,
Nov. 10, 1854.

Mr. Charles Hoyt.

Dear Sir:

You used to express a good deal of partiality for me, and if you are still so, now is the time. Some friends here are really for me, for the U. S. Senate, and I should be very grateful if you could make a mark for me among your members. Please write me at all events giving me the names, post-offices, and "political position" of members round about you. Direct to Springfield.

Let this be confidential.

Clinton, DeWitt Co.,
Nov. 11, 1854.

J. Harding, Esq.

My dear Sir:

I have a suspicion that a Whig has been elected to the Legislature from Edgar. If this is not so, why then "nix cum arous," but if it is so then could you not make a mark with him for me for U. S. Senator? I really have some chance.

Springfield, Ill., Nov. 27, 1854.

T. J. Henderson, Esq.

My dear Sir:

It has come around that a Whig may, by possibility, be elected to the United States Senate and I want the chance of being that man.

Springfield, Dec. 1, 1854.

J. Gillespie, Esq.

My dear Sir:

I have really got it into my head to try to be United States Senator, and, if I could have your support, my chances would be reasonably good. But I know, and acknowledge, that you have as just claims to the place as I have; and therefore I cannot ask you to yield to me, if you are thinking of becoming a candidate, yourself.

Springfield, December 14, 1854.

E. B. Washburne.

My dear Sir:

So far as I am concerned, there must be something wrong about United States senator at Chicago. My most intimate friends there do not answer my letters, and I cannot get a word from them. Wentworth has a knack of knowing things better than most men. I wish you would pump him, and write me what you get from him. Please do this as soon as you can, as the time is growing short. Don't let any one know I have written you this; for there may be those opposed to me nearer about than you think.

Springfield, December 15, 1854.

T. J. Henderson.

Dear Sir:

Yours of the 11th was received last night, and for which I thank you. Of course, I prefer myself to all others; yet it is neither in my heart nor my conscience to say I am any better man than Mr. Williams.

Springfield, January 6, 1855.

E. B. Washburne.

My dear Sir:

... Besides the ten or a dozen on our side who are willing to be known as candidates, I think there are fifty secretly watching for a chance. I do not know that it is much advantage to have the largest number of votes at the start. If I did know this to be an advantage, I should feel better, for I cannot doubt but I have more commitments than any other man.

Springfield, February 9, 1855.

E. B. Washburne.

My dear Sir:

The agony is over at last, and the result you doubtless know. I write this only to give you some particulars to explain what might appear difficult of understanding. I began with 44 votes, Shields 41, and Trumbull 5,—yet Trumbull was elected. In fact, 47 different members voted for me,—getting three new ones on the second ballot, and losing four old ones. How came my 47 to yield to Trumbull's 5? It was Governor Matteson's work. He has been secretly a candidate ever since (before, even) the fall election.

On the seventh ballot, I think, the signal was given to the Nebraska men to turn to Matteson, which they acted on to a man, with one exception, my old friend Strunk going with them, giving him 44 votes.

Next ballot the remaining Nebraska man and one pretended Anti went over to him, giving him 46. The next still another, giving him 47, wanting only three of an election. In the meantime our friends, with a view of detaining our expected bolters, had been turning from me to Trumbull till he had risen to 35 and I had been reduced to 15. These would never desert me except by my direction; but I became

satisfied that if we could prevent Matteson's election one or two ballots more, we could not possibly do so a single ballot after my friends should begin to return to me from Trumbull. So I determined to strike at once, and accordingly advised my remaining friends to go for him, which they did and elected him on the tenth ballot.

Such is the way the thing was done. I think you would have done the same under the circumstances; though Judge Davis, who came down this morning, declares he never would have consented to the forty-seven men being controlled by the five. I regret my defeat moderately, but I am not nervous about it. I could have headed off every combination and been elected, had it not been for Matteson's double game—and his defeat now gives me more pleasure than my own gives me pain. On the whole, it is perhaps as well for our general cause that Trumbull is elected. The Nebraska men confess that they hate it worse than anything that could have happened. It is a great consolation to see them worse whipped than I am. I tell them it is their own fault—that they had abundant opportunity to choose between him and me, which they declined, and instead forced it on me to decide between him and Matteson.

With my grateful acknowledgments for the kind, active, and continued interest you have taken for me in this matter, allow me to subscribe myself,

Yours forever,

Springfield, Ill., Feb. 21, 1855.

Hon. W. H. Henderson.

My dear Sir:

The election is over, the session is ended and I am not Senator. I have to content myself with the honor of having been the first choice of a large majority of the fifty-one members who finally made the election. My larger number of friends had to surrender to Trumbull's smaller number, in order to prevent the election of Matteson, which would have been a Douglas victory. I started with 44 votes and T. with 5. It is rather hard for the 44 to have to surrender to the 5 and a less good humored man than I, perhaps, would not have consented to it,—and it would not have been done without my consent. I could not, however, let the whole political result go to swan, on a point merely personal to myself.

Springfield, March 10, 1855.

Messrs. Sanford, Porter and
Striker, New York.

Gentlemen:

Yours of the 5th is received, as also was that of 15th Dec. last, inclosing bond of Clift to Pray. When I received the bond I was dabbling in politics, and of course neglecting business. Having since been beaten out I have gone to work again.



